The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

At no other time is a man's feeling of companionship with a woman so strong as when he sits at table with her, not at a "decorated" and becatered and bewaitered table, but at a homely, appetizing, wholesome, home table like old Judge Briscoe's. The very essence of the thing is domesticity, and the implication is utter confidence and liking. There are few greater dangers for a bachelor. An insinuating imp perches on his shoulder and, softly tickling the bachelor's ear with the feathers of an arrow shaft, whispers: "Pretty gay, isn't it, eh? Rather pleasant to have that girl sitting there, don't you think? Enjoy having her notice your butter plate was empty? Think it exhilarating to hand her those rolls? Looks nice, doesn't she? Says 'Thank you' rather prettily? Makes your lonely breakfast seem mighty dull, doesn't it? How would you like to have her pour your coffee for you tomorrow, my boy? How would it seem to have such pleasant company all the rest of your life? Pretty cheerful, eh? It's my conviction that your one need in life is to pick her up in your arms and run away with her, not anywhere in particular, but just run and run and run away!"

After dinner they went out to the veranda, and the gentlemen smoked. The judge set his chair down on the ground, tilted back in it with his feet on the steps and blew a wavery, domed city up in the air. He called it solid comfort. He liked to sit out from under the porch roof, he said. He wanted to see more of the sky. The others moved their chairs down to join in the celestial vision. A feathery thin cloud or two had been fanned across it, but save for these there was nothing but glorious and tender brilliant blue. It seemed so clear and close one marveled the little church spire in the distance did not pierce it. Yet at the same time the eye ascended miles and miles and warm, shimmering ether. Far away two buzzards swung slowly at anchor halfway to the sun.

"O bright, translucent, cerulean hue,
Let my wide wings drift on in you,"

Harkless quoted, pointing them out to Helen.

"You seem to get a good deal of fun out of this kind of weather," observed Lige as he wiped his brow and shifted his chair into the shade.

"I expect you don't get such skies as this up in Rouen," said the judge, looking at the girl from between his lazily half closed eyelids.

"It's the same Indiana sky, I think," she answered.

"I guess maybe in the city you don't see as much of it or think as much about it, then. Yes, they're the Indiana skies," the old man went on.

"Skies as blue
As the eyes of children when they smile at you.

"There aren't any others anywhere that ever seemed much like them to me. They've been company for me all my life. I don't think there are any others half as beautiful, and I know there aren't any as sociable. They were always so." He sighed gently, and Miss Sherwood fancied his wife must have found the Indiana skies as lovely as he had in the days of long ago. "Seems to me they are the softest and bluest and kindest in the world."

"I think they are," said Helen, "and they are more beautiful than the Italian skies, though I doubt if many of us Hoosiers realize it, and certainly no one else does."

The old man leaned over and patted her hand. Harkless gasped. "'Us Hoosiers!'" chuckled the judge. "You're a great Hoosier, young lady! How much of your life have you spent in the state? 'Us Hoosiers!'"

"But I'm going to be a good one," she answered gayly, "and if I'm good enough when I grow up maybe I'll be a great one."

The buckboard had been brought around, and the four young people climbed in, Harkless driving. Before they started the judge, standing on the horse block in front of the gate, leaned over and patted Miss Sherwood's hand again. Harkless gathered up the reins.

"You'll make a great Hoosier, all right," said the old man, beaming upon the girl. "You needn't worry about that, I guess, my dear."

When he said "my dear," Harkless spoke to the horses.

"Wait," said the judge, still holding the little hand. "You'll make a great Hoosier some day; don't fret. You're already a very beautiful one." Then he bent his white head and kissed her gallantly.

"Good afternoon, judge," said John. The whip cracked, and the buckboard dashed off in a cloud of dust.

"Every-once in awhile, Harkless," the old fellow called after them, "you must remember to look at the team."

The enormous white tent was filled with a hazy, yellow light, the warm, dusty, mellow light that thrills the rejoicing heart because it is found nowhere else in the world except in the tents of a circus, the canvas filtered sunshine and sawdust atmosphere of show day.

Here swayed a myriad of palm leaf fans; here paraded blushing youth and rosy maiden more relentlessly arm in arm than ever; here crept the octogenarian, Mr. Bodeffer, shaking on cane and the shoulder of posterity; here waddled Mr. Snoddy, who had hurried through the animal tent for fear of meeting the elephant; here marched sturdy yeomen and stout wives; here came William Todd and his true love, the good William hushed with the embarrasaments of love, but looking out warily with the white of his eye for Mr. Martin and determined not to sit within a hundred yards of him; here rolled in the orbit of habit the town bacchanal, Mr. Wilkerson, who politely answered in kind all the uncouth roarings and guttural ejaculations of jungle and fen that came from the animal tent—in brief, here came with lightest heart the population of Carlow and part of Amo.

Helen had found a true word; it was a big family. Jim Bardlock, broadly smiling and rejuvenated, shorn of depression, paused in front of the "reserve" seats, with Mrs. Bardlock on his arm, and called loudly to a gentleman on a tier about the level of Jim's head: "How are ye? I reckon we were a leetle too smart fer 'em this morning, huh?" Five or six hundred people, every one within hearing, turned to look at Jim, but the gentleman addressed was engaged in conversation with a lady and did not notice.

"Hi! Hi, there! Say! Mr. Harkless!" bellowed Jim informally. The people turned to look at Harkless. His attention was arrested, and his cheek grew red.

"What is it?" he asked, a little confused and a good deal annoyed.

"I don't hear what ye say," shouted Jim, putting his hand to his ear.

"What is it?" repeated the young man. "I'll kill that fellow tonight," he added to Lige Willetts. "Some one ought to have done it long ago."

"What?"

"I said, What is it?"

"I jest wanted to say me and you certainly did fool these here Hoosiers this morning. Hustled them two fellers through the courthouse, and nobody thought to slip round to the other door and head us off. Ha, ha! We were jest a leetle too many fer 'em, huh?"

From an upper tier of seats the rusty length of Mr. Martin erected itself joint by joint, like an extension ladder, and he peered down over the gaping faces at the town marshal. "Excuse me," he said sadly to those behind him, but his dry voice penetrated everywhere. "I got up to hear Jim say 'we' again."

Mr. Bardlock joined in the laugh against himself and proceeded with his wife to some seats forty or fifty feet distant. When he had settled himself comfortably he shouted over cheerfully to the unhappy editor, "Them shell men got it in fer you, Mr. Harkless!"

"Hain't that fool shet up yit?" snarled the aged Mr. Bodeffer indignantly. He was sitting near the young couple, and the expression of his sympathy was distinctly audible to them and many others. "Got no more regards than a brazing calf—disturbin' a feller with his sweetheart!"

"The both of 'em says they're going to do fer ye," bleated Mr. Bardlock; "swears they'll ketch their evens with ye."

Mr. Martin rose again. "Don't git scared and leave town, Mr. Harkless!" he called out. "Jim 'll protect you."

Vastly to the young man's relief the band began to play and the equestrians and equestriennes capered out from the dressing tent for the "grand entrance," and the performance commenced. Through the long summer afternoon it went on—wonders of horsemanship and of horsewomanship, hair raising exploits on wires tight and slack, giddy tricks on the high trapeze, feats of leaping and tumbling in the rings, while the tireless musicians blatted inspiringly through it all, only pausing long enough to allow that riotous jester, the clown, to ask the ringmaster what he would do if a young lady came up and kissed him on the street, and to explode his witticisms during short intervals of rest for the athletes.

When it was over, John and Helen found themselves in the midst of a densely packed crowd and separated from Miss Briscoe and Lige. People were pushing and shoving, and he saw her face grow pale. He realized with a pang of sympathy how helpless he would feel if he were as small as she and at his utmost height could only see big, suffocating backs and huge shoulders pressing down from above. He was keeping them from crowding heavily upon her with all his strength, and a royal feeling of protectiveness came over him. She was so little. And yet, without the remotest hint of hardness, she gave him such a distinct impression of poise and equilibrium. She seemed so able to meet anything that might come, to understand it—even to laugh at it—so Americanly capable and sure of the event that, in spite of her pale cheek, he could not feel quite so protective as he wished to feel.

He managed to get her to one of the tent poles and placed her with her back to it. Then he set one of his own hands against it, over her head, braced himself and stood keeping a little space about her and ruggedly letting

"Please don't do that," he answered.

the crowd surge against him as it would. No one should touch her in rough carelessness.

"Thank you. It was rather trying in there," she said and looked up into his eyes with a divine gratitude.

"Please don't do that," he answered in a low voice.

"Do what?"

"Look like that."

She not only looked like that, but more so. "Young man, young man," she said, "I fear you're wishful of turning a girl's head."

The throng was thick around them, garrulous and noisy, but they two were more richly alone together, to his appreciation, than if they stood on some far satellite of Mars. He was not to forget that moment, and he kept the picture of her, as she leaned against the big blue tent pole there, in his heart; the clear, gray eyes lifted to his, the piquant face with the delicate flush stealing back to her cheeks and the brave little figure that had run so straight to him out of the night shadows. There was something about her and in the moment that suddenly touched him with a saddening sweetness too keen to be borne. The forget-me-not finger of the flying hour that could not come again was laid on his soul, and he felt the tears start from his heart on their journey to his eyes. He knew that he should always remember that moment. She knew it too. She put her hand to her cheek and turned away from him a little tremulously. Both were silent.

They had been together since early morning. Plattville was proud of him. Many a friendly glance from the folk who jostled about them favored his suit and wished both of them well, and many lips, opening to speak to Harkless in passing, closed when their owners, more tactful than Mr. Bardlock, looked a second time.

Old Tom Martin, still perched alone on his high seat, saw them standing by the tent pole and watched them from under his dusty hat brim. "I reckon it's be'n three or four thousand years sence I was young," he sighed to himself. Then, pushing his hat still farther down over his eyes, "I don't believe I'd ort to rightly look on at that." He sighed again as he rose and gently spoke the name of his dead wife: "Marjie, I reckon you're mighty tired waitin' for me. It's be'n lonesome sometimes"—

"Do you see that tall old man up there?" said Helen, nodding her head toward Martin. "I think I should like to know him. I'm sure I like him."

"That is old Tom Martin."

"I know."

"I was sorry and ashamed about all that conspicuousness and shouting. It must have been very unpleasant for you. It must have been so for a stranger. Please try to forgive me for letting you in for it."

"But I liked it. It was 'all in the family,' and it was so jolly and good natured, and that dear old man was so bright. Do you know," she went on in a low voice, "I don't believe I'm so much a stranger—I think I love all these people a great deal—in spite of having known them only two days."

At that a wild exhilaration possessed him. He wanted to shake hands with every soul in the tent, to tell them all that he loved them with his whole heart; but, what was vastly more important, she loved them a great deal—in spite of having known them only two days.

He made the horses prance on the homeward drive, and once, when she told him that she had read a good many of his political columns in the Herald, he ran them into a fence. After this it occurred to him that they were nearing their destination and had come at perversely sharp gait, so he held the reins down to a snail's pace (if it be true that a snail's natural gait is not a trot) for the rest of the way, and they talked of Tom Meredith and books and music, and discovered that they differed widely about Ibsen.

They found Mr. Fisbee in the yard, talking to Judge Briscoe. As they drove up and before the horses had quite stopped Helen leaped to the ground and ran to the old scholar with both her hands outstretched to him. He looked timidly at her and took the hands she gave him; then he produced from his pocket a yellow telegraph envelope, watching her anxiously as she received it. However, she seemed to attach no particular importance to it, and instead of opening it leaned toward him, still holding one of his hands.

"These awful old men!" Harkless groaned inwardly as he handed the horses over to the judge. "I dare say he'll kiss her too." But when the editor and Mr. Willetts had gone it was Helen who kissed Fisbee.

"They're coming out to spend the evening, aren't they?" asked Briscoe, nodding to the young men as they set off down the road.

"Lige has to come whether he wants to or not," Minnie laughed rather consciously. "It's his turn tonight to look after Mr. Harkless."

"I guess he won't mind coming," said the judge.

"Well," returned his daughter, glancing at Helen, who stood apart reading the telegram to Fisbee, "I know if he follows Mr. Harkless he'll get here pretty soon after supper—as soon as the moon comes up, anyway."

The editor of the Herald was late to his evening meal that night. It was dusk when he reached the hotel, and for the first time in history a gentleman sat down to meat in that house of entertainment in evening dress. There was no one in the dining room when he went in—the other boarders had finished, and it was Cynthia's "evening out"—but the landlord, Columbus Landis, came and attended to his wants himself and chatted with him while he ate.

"There's a picture of Henry Clay," remarked Landis in obvious relevancy to his companion's attire—"there's a picture of Henry Clay somewheres about the house in a swallow tail. Governor Ray spoke here in one, Bodeffer says; always wore one, except it was higher built up 'n yourn about the collar and had brass buttons. I think. Ole man Wimby was here again tonight," the landlord continued, changing the subject. "He waited around fer ye a good while, but last he had to go. He's be'n mighty wrought up sence the trouble this morning an' wanted to see ye bad. I don't know if you seen it, but that feller 't knocked your hat off with a club got mighty near tore to pieces in the crowd before he got away. Seems some of the boys re-cog-nized him as one of the Crossroads Skillets and sicked the dogs on him, and he had a pretty mean time of it. Wimby says the Crossroads folks 'll be worse 'n ever, and, says he, 'Tell him to stick close to town,' says he. 'They'll do anything to git him now,' says he, 'and resk anything.' I told him you wouldn't take no stock in what any one says, and I knowed well enough you'd laugh that a-way. But, see here, we don't put nothin' too mean for them folks. I tell ye, Mr. Harkless, all of us are scared for ye."

The good fellow was so earnest that when the editor's supper was finished and he would have departed, Landis detained him almost by force until the arrival of Mr. Willetts, who, the landlord knew, was his allotted escort for the evening. When Lige came (wearing a new tie, a pink one he had hastened to buy as soon as his engagements had given opportunity) the landlord hissed a savage word of reproach for his tardiness in his ear and whisperingly bade him not let the other out of reach that night. Mr. Willetts replied with a nod implying his trustworthiness, and the young men went out into the darkness.

(Continued Next Sunday.)